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Armageddon in the Persian Gulf?



Prophesiers of Armageddon have yet to be interviewed on CNN, but preliminary reports from publishers and Christian bookstores have indicated that books on the subject are enjoying impressive new popularity. For 15% of Americans, the War in the Gulf, with reports and datelines from places such as Babylon, Jerusalem and Nineveh, is seen as fulfillment of the prophesy of the final great battle of Armageddon before Judgement Day, as recorded in Revelations. Three persons in four (74%) do not believe this will be the final battle, and 11% are undecided on the matter.

Thoughts of Armageddon are strongest among those who say religion is very important in their lives (19%). Far less belief is found among people who say religion is only somewhat important (11%), but even among those who say religion is not very important in their lives, eight percent feel Armageddon may be imminent.

Women are more likely than men to believe this will be the final battle, by a margin of 18% to 11%. Interestingly, belief of impending Armageddon is strongest among the young, with nearly one person in four (23%) who is between the ages of 18 and

29, holding this view. Within this age group, young women (28%) more often than young men (18%) feel the war in the Persian Gulf may be fulfilling biblical prophesy.

Visions of Armageddon are less frequent among older adults. Only 13% of the those who are ages 30 to 49 believe in it, and belief is found among just 11% of those who are 50 or older. It is particularly noteworthy in this context that younger people are more often expecting Armageddon, since on most survey measurements older people tend more often to express biblically inspired beliefs.

In more secular terms, nearly three people in four are very worried (32%) or somewhat worried (40%) that the situation in the Persian Gulf will develop into a larger war that could spread throughout the region and into other parts of the world. Not too worried are 19%, and 8% say they are not worried at all about the war spreading.

Power of Prayer

Over half of the populace (58%) report they have prayed more than usual since the beginning of the war. A similar percentage (59%) believe their prayers can be very effective in a situation like the one now faced in the Persian Gulf. An additional 22% say

they think praying can be fairly effective. Disagreeing with the power of prayer in this situation are 14% who believe it may not be very effective, and 5% who are undecided on the matter.

The questions were asked as follows:

"Some people feel that this Middle Eastern war means Armageddon, the final great battle before Judgement Day, predicted in the Bible. Do you think this war is Armageddon, or not? How worried are you that the current situation in the Persian Gulf will develop into a larger war that could spread throughout the region and other parts of the world—Would you say you are very worried, somewhat worried, not too worried, or not at all worried about that? As a result of the beginning of the war in the Persian Gulf, have you ... prayed more than you usually do? How effective do you think prayers can be in a situation like this one in the Persian Gulf—very effective, fairly effective, or not very effective?"

The findings are based on interviews with a nationwide cross-section of 1,011 adults, ages 18 and older, interviewed for the Gallup Poll during the period of January 17-20, 1991—in the early days of the war.

Religious Research in the 1990s — Part II

Reported by Robert Wuthnow

C. Ethical Consequences of Spirituality

1. Causal links between religion and behavior

Past efforts to find law-like scientific regularities between religious commitment and attitudes and behavior failed because correlations proved to be too dependent upon contexts and situations.

Modern research suggests it is more fruitful to examine beliefs that result in behavior if they occur within a supportive community.

We also need to know if belief affects behavior best when it is distilled into propositional knowledge such as moral dictums, or is more consequential when it occurs in narrative form.

2. Biblical models in the secular culture

Have biblical models dropped out entirely, so that even some seminary programs on ethics pay more attention to Bentham and Rawls than to Leviticus and Romans? Maybe biblical models haven't dropped out, but have gone underground, and public figures draw on them unconsciously or, if consciously, translate them into secular metaphors. Maybe even the stories and parables learned in Sunday School as children continue to influence ethical decisions in adult life in profound ways.

- Do people believe in transcendent sources of value or is everything based on human reason?
- Are the Ten Commandments known? How do they serve as moral guides?
- What are the root metaphors in our culture? The Good Samaritan, the rugged pioneer, or "looking out for Number One"?
- What is our total intake of stories

from television, personal encounters, reading and church?

3. Spirituality and prosocial behavior

Religion has an important impact upon voluntarism.

- Do small church groups play a special role in encouraging helping behavior?
- Is there a special style of spirituality that encourages altruism?
- What can churches learn from secular volunteer programs?
- Do churches encourage only traditional kinds of caring and ignore others?

4. The new bioethical challenges

Ethical questions are becoming increasingly specialized and dependent upon narrow disciplines, scientific knowledge and new technologies.

Valuable research could result from interviewing scientists, professionals and lawmakers to combine their profession concerns with broader questions about religion and values. This already is needed on subjects such as abortion and euthanasia; we can only guess what the other topics will be over the decade.

D. The Challenges of Cultural Pluralism

1. New tribalism or new individualism?

Studies demonstrated that strong governments encouraged privatization and individual withdrawal from public life. Now in Eastern Europe we are seeing the reassertion of national and ethnic identity, a new tribalism. Some say, first it will be Lithuania, then Quebec, and then California.

Interest in small religious groups may be the inevitable outcome of living in diverse worlds and wanting to find people like ourselves. We are

lucky if we can find half a dozen people in a church of 2,000 that we truly like to be with. Our "tribes" become smaller, as we band together with people around increasingly specialized interests—our demons of the moment. If our demon is alcohol, we go to AA. If it is work-ahol, we join the vestry.

2. Ethnic/racial pride vs. ethnic/racial conflict

The old melting pot question is being reheated: Is tolerance and public life best served by blending with others, or do strong ethnic and racial fences somehow make us better neighbors?

Churches in diverse communities face this issue head on. If members want to remain homogeneous, how do they relate to their communities? Respect is a key, but how do disadvantaged people gain enough self-confidence to respect others? Can this self-confidence truly be gained in homogeneous groups, or is interaction in diverse settings required?

3. Islamic growth in the United States

The exact statistics are not clear, but it is obvious the Islamic population has grown and will continue to grow. Its presence brings new challenges to the Judaeo-Christian community.

What are the public's attitudes towards Muslims? How much interfaith cooperation is desired? Is anything significant happening at the local level already?

4. Public discourse

Cultural pluralism means we speak many languages and use words that have many meanings. Are we able to communicate at all, or do we merely talk past each other, leaving the real choices to the powerful or to

the blind workings of the marketplace.

Do any religious symbols still have importance in public discourse? Do public prayers carry unifying weight at political conventions? What about crosses carried at anti-abortion rallies?

Religious language seems more to divide Americans than to unite them. Is religion actually a polite way of labeling and masking deeper social divisions? We call people Black Muslims, but maybe we really mean black nationalists. How do we get at these underlying divisions?

It would be a valuable methodological project to experiment with alternative ways of asking questions about religion in, say, Black, Anglo, Hispanic and Asian communities.

E. The Spiritual Needs of Youth

1. Spiritual and moral education

Fewer and fewer children may be receiving religious education in the churches. In diverse communities many children do not go to church because they know nobody there, churches may pare down offerings because there are fewer teachers, and young parents may not have had religious education themselves.

What was said earlier about faith literacy applies doubly for youth. We need to find out what they know, how they know, and how likely it is their knowledge could be increased.

2. What is the religious consciousness of youth?

A generation ago, we paid much attention to the so-called new religious consciousness of young adults. A whole new generation has emerged, with even greater cultural options, but we know little of their beliefs and aspirations.

3. How can we minister to 18-30 year-olds?

The long-term future of the church of course is in the hands of young people who usually are not involved

in the church during their salad days. What are their needs? For personal meaning? For support and belonging? Where are these needs being met? What can the church do?

Is this cohort subject to more economic pressures and declining expectations for careers and incomes? Is this having a negative impact on self-images? Can spiritual resources enhance self-esteem?

What are the implications of the cultural uncertainty and rampant religious relativism faced by young people when making their most important life decisions about marriage, careers, and families?

4. What do we know about exemplary youth?

What about some positive models? Study youth to see their good works. Identify the volunteers, the spiritually motivated, and the leaders, so that others can see them as role models.

F. Religious Resources for the Disadvantaged

1. What can/should black churches do?

A wall of fear has emerged between the "haves" and the "have nots" in our society. Even the generous are afraid to reach out to the truly disadvantaged. Many of the disadvantaged are black, especially young black males. The family has broken down, the schools have been ineffective, and it is questionable if there are any sources of potential institutional support beyond the church. It reaches probably 70% of the black population on a regular basis, but this probably does not include the truly disadvantaged. The potential is there.

There are real or imagined barriers that impede the black clergy to use resources at their disposal. Research is needed to determine:

- Do members of black churches support or oppose various kinds of community involvement?
- Are they willing to give time and money for various causes?
- What are their concerns about church-state conflicts when cooper-

ating with government programs?

2. What ever happened to "economic justice"?

Apart from voluntarism, little is said anymore about economic justice and other kinds of structural reform. Maybe economic justice needs to be rethought in a way that combines structural reform with a greater sense of individual responsibility. The disadvantaged need help, but they also need conviction. Research could show what combinations of ideas are likely to have greatest impact on varying segments of the disadvantaged population.

3. How can the mentally ill be helped?

Many of the mentally ill, who formerly were cared for have been dumped on the streets by deinstitutionalization.

What current or untapped resources do the churches have to deal with this problem? Could greater use be made of volunteers specially trained to help, or of church members skilled in social work or therapy?

Conclusions

These are vital concerns facing all religious communities in our society. They have practical implications for our nation's health. They bear heavily upon, but also go beyond, the interests of denominational officials and clergy. They are matters of great civic importance. They call for major research projects to be initiated that advance knowledge beyond the narrow disputes of academic disciplines and denominational boundaries. Urgently needed are creative research initiatives to examine the practical dimensions of these issues and to disseminate results to those who will put this information to use.

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What Every Pastor ...

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sequence of not being loved or appreciated. Low self-esteem brings with it a host of social problems, including alcohol and drug abuse, child and spouse abuse, lawlessness and crime.

Significantly, we have discovered that the closer people feel to God, the better they feel about themselves. They are also more satisfied with their lives than are others, more altruistic, enjoy better health, and have a happier outlook. Furthermore, we have found that experiencing the closeness of God is a key factor in the ability of people to forgive themselves and others.

4. The need to be listened to—to be heard. The main theme in our book, *The People's Religion*, is that religion in the future is more likely to be shaped from the bottom up than by the top down: from the people in the pews rather than by the hierarchy. In a special survey conducted for this book, we discovered that Americans overwhelmingly think the future of the church will be shaped to a greater extent by the laity than by the clergy. Not only do they think it will happen, they believe also that it *should* happen.

In specific terms this means, for example, that the laity should play a greater role in the church, freeing up clergy to perform what the laity expects of them: to listen to people's religious needs and to provide spiritual counseling and inspiration. When the unchurched in one survey were asked what would most likely draw them back into the community of active worshippers, the lead reason given was "if I could find a pastor, priest or rabbi with whom I could share my religious needs and doubts."

If churches do not heed the voice of the laity for a greater say in the way churches are run, they will continue to lose vitality and will not be able to reverse the downtrends in membership.

The clergy need to listen more carefully to what the laity are saying, both in one-on-one discussions, and well as in group sessions. One way to enhance the listening process is to undertake carefully designed surveys of church members, as well as of those who are currently unchurched.

5. The need to feel that one is growing in faith. People do not like to suffer periods of spiritual stagnation, and the fact is we go through passages in our faith lives, just as we do in our secular lives. Seven Americans in 10 say they have experienced a change in faith during their lifetimes.

It would appear that, basically, people aspire to lead good lives. Significant numbers of people have given thought to living a worthwhile life, to their relationship to God, to the basic meaning and value of their lives, and to developing their faith.

Churches need to pay close attention to the passages people experience in their faith lives, and to religious experiences which often change the course of one's life. People need help in understanding the significance of these experiences and in building upon them.

6. The need for practical help in developing a mature faith. The clergy often tend to make assumptions about the depth of religious commitment in the lives of members of their churches—to assume that their prayer life is more developed, and that people have a higher level of knowledge about their faith and the traditions of their denomination—than actually is the case. Clergy therefore can often find themselves in the unfortunate situation of trying to win support for programs and causes from a laity that is spiritually listless and uninformed.

A close look at where people are in their spiritual lives, and the level of their knowledge, would shock most clergy: We read the Bible, but we are a nation of biblical illiterates. We pray and believe in the power of prayer, but do not give our prayer life the attention it deserves. We believe the Ten Commandments to be valid rules

of life, but we are unable to name many of them. We would be hard pressed to defend our faith, because we are uncertain about what we believe, let alone why we believe.

Ungrounded in biblical faith many are vulnerable and are drawn to a wide variety of bizarre spiritual movements. For example, a large percentage of teen-agers today believe in superstitions such as astrology. Through inattention on the part of churches, and lethargy on the part of the laity and for other reasons, the churches of our nation have permitted a huge spiritual vacuum to develop; one which is drawing in millions of unwitting and unsuspecting Americans.

We need to work toward closing the gap between belief and practice—we need to turn professed faith into live-out faith. What is called for are not new committees, new strategies or position papers; we need nothing less than changed hearts.

Two major challenges face all churches: To reach as many people as possible, and to reach them as deeply as possible, to broaden the church itself and deepen it. Perhaps the deepening process should come first, because parishioners must first be prepared and equipped before they can be effective in evangelistic efforts.

Thanks to the unprecedented level of freedom in the United States, Americans are able to make choices about their future. These choices, many believe, apply most deeply at the religious level: Will we choose the living God, or will we choose the substitute gods of the modern age—money, possessions, fame, drugs, a self-indulgent lifestyle? Will our religion be God-given or man-made? To quote Rev. Peter Moore, an Episcopal priest in *Disarming the Secular Gods*, "We have no significance, health or happiness save that which comes when we surrender the illusion of being the center of the universe and joyfully celebrate God at that center."

What Every Pastor Should Know About the Average American

By George Gallup, Jr.

Editor's note: This column is taken from a talk given by George Gallup, Jr. at the meeting of the Theological Students Fellowship, Princeton Theological Seminary, on December 10, 1990.



For 55 years we have surveyed Americans on a wide range of topics, but we really cannot tell you much about the individual average American. As Sir Arthur Conan Doyle once said: "While the individual man is an unsoluble mystery, in the aggregate he becomes a mathematical certainty." Indeed, each of the five billion people on the globe is a wonderfully unique creature of God. But through penetrating and repeated surveys we are, hopefully, beginning to learn a great deal more about people in the aggregate, in terms of both their secular and religious lives.

In the analysis that follows, I am really talking about the *composite* American because there is no such thing as the *average* American, save perhaps to say that he or she is middle-aged, with a middle income, with middle-of-the-road views, facing a mid-life crisis, living in the Midwest, possibly in a place called Middletown.

In studying America, our surveys have increasingly played a crucial role in the exploration of the inner life of its people. When scientific surveys came upon the scene in the mid-1930s, it became possible to provide an objective assessment of what people think and believe. Prior to that time, the history of what the average person thought and believed was based largely on educat-

ed guesses by novelists, journalists and "arm chair" researchers.

Over the last half-century we have learned a great deal about the breadth of religion, but relatively little about the depth, about the inner life of humankind. The fact is that most social scientists have tended to turn their backs on explorations of the inner life, dismissing it as a subjective realm and therefore not worthy of study. Yet if one were to select the most important dynamic in the life of Americans that explains our uniqueness and character, it would be, not politics, not educational level, not region of the country, but the religious dynamic.

The new frontier of social research is, I believe, the inner life. The last half of the current century has been dedicated to the exploration of outer space. The next century, I think we may assume, will be dedicated to exploring inner space. There are undoubtedly many exciting discoveries ahead as we seek to probe beneath the surface of lives. Having said this, however, I should hasten to add there are obvious limitations to the depth of exploration possible.

Yet I believe that carefully conceived and executed surveys that penetrate beneath the surface of lives can help build up the body of Christ and further the kingdom of God. It is my belief that, since the vast majority of the people of the world believe in God or a power outside ourselves, the most profound purpose and worthy pursuit of scientific surveys is to probe the response of humanity to God, to the extent that this is possible.

Now, I would like turn to six basic spiritual needs of Americans at this point in history (apart from their natural needs for such things as food, clothing and shelter) and to explore the question of whether churches are relating to these needs, as well as to discuss possible steps to help churches better meet these needs.

1. The need to believe that life is meaningful and has a purpose. During a time when sociologists observe an obsession with self in America,

70% of Americans nevertheless believe it is very important that life is meaningful and has a purpose. Yet now as many as two-thirds of people interviewed believe that "most churches and synagogues today are not effective in helping people find meaning in life." Here is a basic need apparently being only partially met. The fact is, significant numbers of people find churches irrelevant, unfulfilling and boring.

2. The need for a sense of community and deeper relationships. Many factors conspire to cause separateness in our society. At a personal level there is high mobility, divorce, and the breakup of families. In the aggregate, the world is becoming increasingly impersonal with the growth of megacities, multinational corporations, and bureaucracies. "Radical individualism" has taken hold in the religious lives of Americans. The large majority of Americans, for example, now believe that one can be a good Christian or Jew if one does not attend church or synagogue.

One of the poignant consequences to this separateness is loneliness. As we have discovered from surveys, as many as three persons in 10 say they have been lonely "for a long period of time" in their lives, with half of these people saying this experience has affected their thoughts "a great deal."

Our churches, synagogues and other faith communities need to deal frontally with the separateness and acute loneliness in our society by encouraging corporate worship, as well as participation in small groups. Small groups, rooted in prayer and Bible study, may be the best hope for a renewed church in the 1990s.

3. The need to be appreciated and respected. This is certainly a basic and fundamental need, yet as many as one-third of the American people have a low sense of self-worth or self-esteem, as a direct con-

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Teens Give Clergy Top Grades



Most teens in a recent Gallup Youth Survey said local priests, ministers and rabbis deserve above-average grades for community service. According to the teen-age report card, 52% say the local clergy should be graded an "A," and 29% as "B" for their work in the community. Just 9% of the teens consider the clergy an average "C," and very few would mark them as a "D" (2%) or failing (1%). The remaining 7% of teens held no opinion.

The local clergy most often get an A from teen-agers living in the South (58%), and least frequently from those residing in western states (44%).

Among the local community services tested in the survey, the 81% total of A or B grades received by the local clergy from teens was surpassed only by top grades given by 91% to fire fighters and 84% to local libraries. Less often receiving above-average grades from teens were teachers (76%), the local police (74%), local youth and recreational program leaders (73%), sanitation workers (73%) welfare program directors (69%), and mayors (61%).

Ratings were obtained through the question, "Students are most often given grades A, B, C, D and FAIL for the quality of their work. Suppose services in your own community were graded this way, what mark would you give each of the following ... local priests, ministers or rabbis?"

The findings are based on telephone interviews with a nationwide sample of 500 teen-agers, 13 through 17, conducted during the period of October 12-28, 1990.

Bibles in the Gulf

The New York Times reports that despite stories of Saudi Arabian censorship of Judaeo-Christian symbols, half a million copies of the Bible are being sent to the Persian Gulf area for use by American military personnel. Their covers will be in the now familiar brown and tan desert camouflage so often seen on television.

About 300,000 copies containing both the Old and New Testaments are being sent by the American Bible Society. In addition, the International Bible Society is sending 200,000 copies of the New Testament in desert garb.

The illuminated capital letters in this month's issue were printed in France in the sixteenth century.

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